

U.S. Life-Saving Service Station

The Coos Bay bar proved treacherous. Numerous shipwrecks and loss of life led to mounting public pressure for lighthouse and life-saving facilities. The concerns were shared nationally. In 1874 S. J. Kimball, John Faunce, and J. H. Merryman of the U.S. Life-Saving Service recommended to Congress funding of construction of twenty-three stations, twenty-two life-boat stations, and five houses of refuge. They estimated a cost of \$242,304.45 for these facilities. In their proposal was an Oregon site: "Cape Arago, a life-boat station" (Kimball, Faunce and Merryman 1874:1-6).

Congress appropriated the funds and the U.S. Life-Saving Service erected a life-boat station in the mid-1870s on the eastern face of the island at Gregory Point. The station was immediately adjacent to the keepers' quarters of the Cape Arago Lighthouse. The facility had one staff member during its operation from 1878 to 1891 (Dodge 1898:450-451). The station proved problematic. The single employee was unable to launch and row the life-boat to ships in distress. He was dependent upon volunteers who had to travel down Coos Bay, cross overland from Charleston through the forest on rough a wagon road to the lighthouse, cross to the island, and assist in launching and manning the lifeboat. Sentiments mounted for a more efficient location and larger facility (Beckham 1995:25-27).

C. S. Fairchild, Secretary of the Treasury, on November 28, 1887, sought withdrawal of three lots in Section 25, T25S, R10W, W.M., for life-saving purposes. Lot 4, a tract of 37.20 acres, however, had been patented in 1882 to Henry Sengstacken of Empire City and Lot 1, a tract of 50.30 acres had been patented in 1884 to W. H. S. Hyde and L. Simpkins. These cash entry purchases meant that the withdrawal order secured only Lot 2. On December 13, 1887, the Secretary of the Treasury withdrew a tract of 26.19 acres for life-saving purposes (BLM n.d.a, n.d.b).

Congress appropriated funds in 1890 for construction of a new life-saving station complex on the North Spit in Lot 2. Peter Loggie, brother of George W. Loggie of Empire City, secured the contract and began work in March. The *Coos Bay News* on April 15, 1891, noted: "Inspector Bryant, of the life-saving construction department, considers the station now being built near Empire has had the best work done on it, so far, of any station on the coast. It is being built by Messrs. Loggie & Chisholm" (Anonymous 1891a). In late June the contractors completed their work and turned over the station to the U.S. Life-Saving Service. Crewmen--a full complement--began moving the boats and apparatus from the old station at Cape Arago Lighthouse to the new facility (Anonymous 1891b).

The initial employees of the first fully staffed station in August, 1891 included the following:

- ▲ Alex Scott, age thirty-five, from Indiana
- ▲ Mike Paulson, age thirty-one, from Sweden
- ▲ Alex Erickson, age thirty-six, from Sweden
- ▲ James Tompson, age twenty-one, from Scotland
- ▲ John Rondale, age thirty-six, from Scotland
- ▲ William Wilkins, age twenty-seven, from Germany
- ▲ Robert Breen, age twenty-six, from Oregon

John (or James) Hodgson was the first keeper (Anonymous 1891c).

The station on the east side of the North Spit was built to a pattern plan developed by the U.S. Life-Saving Service. The crew quarters and bathhouse were an exact duplicate of those erected at Bandon at the mouth of the Coquille River, at South Beach near Newport at the mouth of the Yaquina River, and on the North Spit at the mouth of the Umpqua River. The quarters building was one and one-half story, wood frame, with a shingled, gable roof and a prominent cross-gable on its east (front) elevation. The

fenestration was regular with four-over-four, double hung sash windows, each surmounted by eight, small-pane transom lights. The windows were covered by exterior, wood shutters (Figure 41). The quarters had an open veranda with four supporting posts at its front entrance (Osborne and West 1981:45-46).

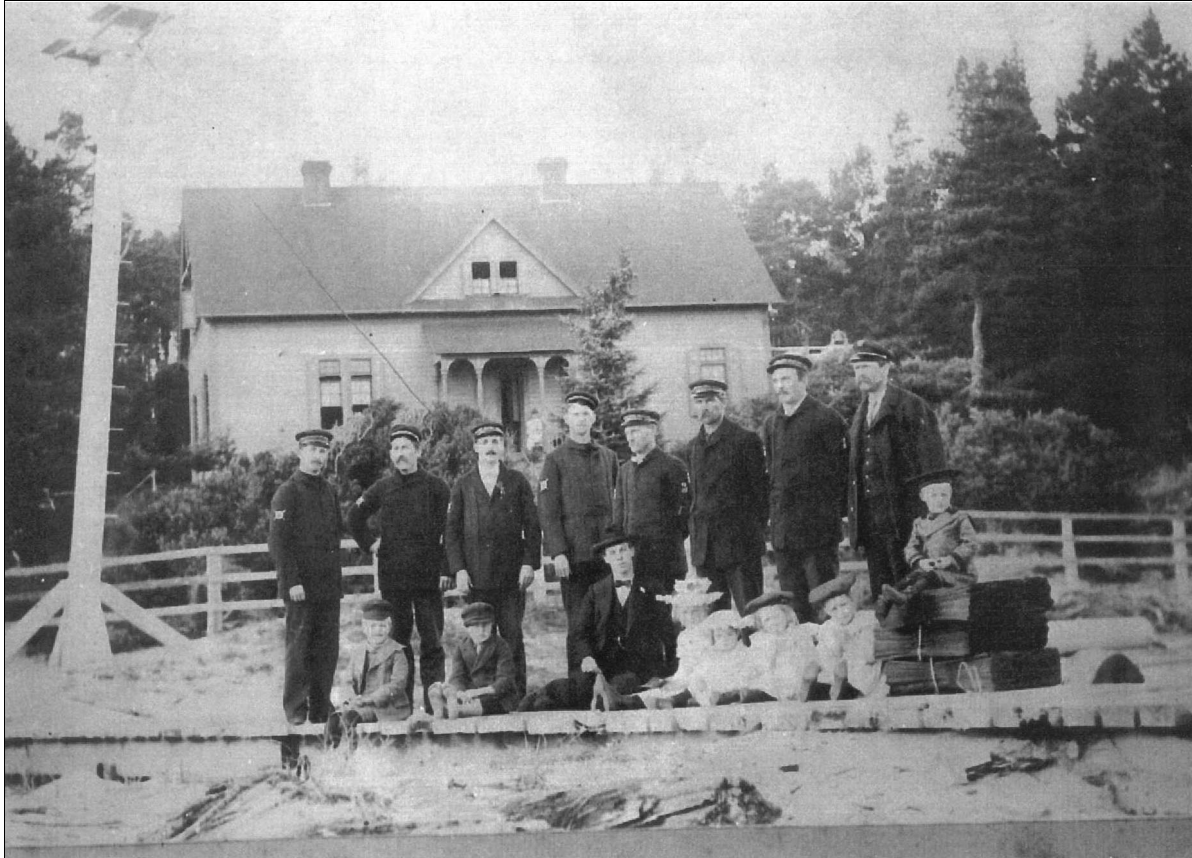


Fig. 41. U.S. Life Saving Service and crew quarters, North Spit, ca. 1899. Row 1 (l to r): Aso Jacobsen, Ed Pederson Skog, Andrew Wickman, Alpha Pederson, Tillie Jacobsen, Annie Jacobson, Carl Jacobson; Row 2: Z. C. Copeland, John Pederson, Sam Morris, Ed Marcy, Charles Nordstrom, Joe Younker, Jerry Haynes, Capt. Jacobson (Slattery Collection, Coos County Historical Society).

The crew barracks stood approximately forty feet west of the line of vegetation along the margin of the bay at a location west of the boathouse. The boathouse was located on piling with a launching ramp on the margin of the bay. By about 1900 the crews at the station employed two boats: a double-ended Dobbins, self-righting surfboat, hoisted into the boat house on a keel-track; and an open surfboat, mounted on a four-wheel cart which ran to the bay via a plank track. The boathouse had a steeply-pitched hip roof with octagonal cupola (Douthit 1981:25). In 1898 the Coos Bay station was identified as a first-class facility. It had a lifeboat, surfboat, beach apparatus, shiplines, shotlines, and various other devices useful in rescuing mariners and passengers in trouble (Dodge 1898:459-451).

The operations of the station on the North Spit were sporadically eventful. A variety of maritime mishaps drew the crew's attention. Sometimes they provided a tow. Other times they dashed to Empire City to secure a steam tug to assist a grounded vessel. Many times they braved surf and storm to rescue crewmen and passengers from beleaguered vessels. Shipwrecks which drew their service included the following:

- ▲ *Charles W. Wetmore*, a whaleback steamer which wrecked on the North Spit on September 8, 1892. The Life-Saving Service rescued twenty-two men.

- ▲ *Emily*, a schooner-rigged steamer which wrecked on the bar on July 17, 1893. The Life-Saving Service rescued twenty crew and thirty-six passengers with one loss of life.

- ▲ *Arago*, a steamer which hit the outer end of the North Jetty on October 20, 1896. Thirteen drowned and nineteen were rescued.

- ▲ *Empire*, a steamer which stranded on the North Spit on April 19, 1901. All were rescued and the ship was refloated.

- ▲ *Sacramento*, a schooner which broke up off the North Spit on October 15, 1905. All six of the crew were rescued.
- ▲ *Chinook*, a schooner barge, grounded near the mouth of Coos Bay on April 12, 1907. Six of the crew were rescued.
- ▲ *Marconi*, a schooner, wrecked three miles southwest of the station on March 23, 1909. The Life-Saving Service rescued eight men.
- ▲ *Czarina*, a steamer, wrecked adjacent to the North Spit on January 12, 1910. The vessel had passed out over the bar and then, losing power, was swept back onto the sands off the North Spit (Figure 42). Its crewmen and passengers climbed into the rigging while the Life-Saving Service crew tried in vain to shoot a line to the vessel or to get a surfboat out through the waves to effect a rescue. The passing hours took their toll. The cold water and dashing waves cleared the rigging. Twenty-two fell or were swept to their deaths before the watch of those lining the beach. One survivor washed ashore on a plank (Anonymous 1910a, 1910b; Christensen 1972).



Fig. 42. Men clinging to the rigging on the *Czarina*, wrecked on the North Spit, January 12, 1910 (Coos County Historical Society).

▲ *North Star*, a launch, wrecked on the north jetty on January 20, 1912. All six aboard drowned.

▲ *Osprey*, a gas schooner, wrecked on the bar on November 1, 1912. Five drowned.

▲ *Advent*, a schooner, wrecked on the bar on February 18, 1913. Eight were rescued.

(Osborne and West 1981)

The location of the station on the North Spit nearly two miles north along the beach from the north jetty mitigated against constant monitoring of bar conditions and quick response to accidents. Interest mounted for relocating the Life-Saving station to Charleston. In the fall of 1912 officials from Washington, D.C., selected a site in the military reservation at Coos Head at the western point of the beach at Charleston. Local carpenters built the new station: a boathouse and keeper's duplex. At its completion in December, 1915, the U.S. Life-Saving Service abandoned the North Spit station and relocated at Charleston (Anonymous 1912). In 2000 the boathouse at Charleston is a lecture hall for the University of Oregon Marine Biology Station; the keepers' quarters, moved approximately one-fourth mile east of its original site, is used as an office building at the biology station.

The U.S. Life-Saving Service established a cemetery within Lot 2 for burial of bodies found during its work and for those who died at the station. In 1989 Myrtle (Masales) Johnston, who was born at the station in 1910, recalled that her brother, Steve Masales, died at the site and was buried in this cemetery (Johnston 1989). The infant child of Annie (Wasson) Breen, whose husband served in the Life-Saving Service in the 1890s, was also buried in this cemetery probably prior to 1900 (Wooldridge, Beckham and Smith 1982:157).